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THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY.*

BY E. C. KYTE.

To traverse in imagination the course of that great stream of literature which is poured through our national life—to review its progress from those far-off inaccessible heights whence it trickled a solitary rivulet until this hour of the full flood—is to form in the mind a series of heart-moving pictures.

Before our eyes there now runs a river, joined daily by the waters of a thousand brooks, serving a thousand cities, bearing fortunes upon its bosom, and broadening ever between bank and bank. Beside this stream stands the mill of the public library. Its motive power is derived from the river; it takes up a portion (insignificant only, compared with the volume which rolls by), and of this it uses, not the mere molecules themselves, but the force which has carried those drops so far—the energy—that in them which most recalls their source. Small as the store comparatively is, it yet bulks large contrasted with the draught which any individual can single-handed scoop from the waters. Also we are enabled to select—no need to drink of every spring which has mingled with the flow—and there *are* drops that come unsullied from the primal source, and other drops that in their sweetness have more of rain than river.

We have to consider what purpose the mill attempts, and what it fulfills; we must distinguish the effect that remains when the drops pass back again; their force has turned the wheel indeed, but what grist have they brought to the mill? How much of the nation's corn, the raw material of intellectual abilities, is one stage the nearer to becoming that bread of knowledge which brings the power to achieve?

A speaker addressing a mingled audience, where friends are ranged with foes and the indifferent predominate over both, is justified in making assumptions, in piling up assertion and paradox, and in taking the substantial integrity of his cause as a matter beyond dispute. Among those who have been educated to a common belief in education there is no

need of oratorical weapons; I, therefore, taking nothing as granted, would go with you *pari passu*, and work out as far as possible the true value to this nation of the public library. It has become so much the custom to express everything of a comparative nature diagrammatically that I am conscious of some disadvantage in not being able to set before you by means of cubes and circles "of various colours and sizes" the exact proportion which the public library to-day bears to its prototype of forty years ago. Yet it may be sufficient to show that, enormously as our libraries have increased in all internal matters which make statistics possible, their relative co-ordinance with external public education has made an even greater advance.

Will you for a moment consider the position of the public library during the years immediately preceding the educational settlement of 1870? It had barely passed out of the experimental stage—memories of the halfpenny rate limit still lingered—London practically ignored it, and outside a limited circle any claim that it could ever be more than a state-aided competitor with Mudie's was greeted with compassionate smiles. The great provincial cities were indeed proving the worth of their libraries; but even in Manchester and Birmingham these were Ishmaelite institutions, so far as any co-operation in educational matters existed. Of course the departments were themselves disproportionate; the works of reference were far outweighed by the three-volume novels; but as the *clientèle* of a reference department can only be built up slowly while a lending library public is ready-made, this disproportion was inevitable.

The debates in Parliament upon the first Public Libraries Act had produced some very candid opinions as to the utter absurdity of the whole agitation. Sir Anthony Absolute's view of a library as "an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge" was quite representative of the feelings expressed. Beaten, so far as any attempt to kill the movement went, there was no abatement of dislike; and this after several years of trial summed itself up in the damning adjective, "unnecessary." Authorities appeared to labour under an obsession of the British Museum; and when the Caliph Omar condemned the books of Alexandria upon the dilemma of

* Paper read at the Hampstead Branch of the P.N.E.U.

being either pernicious or useless, he furnished these worthies with an argument against public libraries. There was "no speculation in their eye" as to whether the future held any good thing in store for these upstarts; but the libraries were already stretching tentative toes to touch bottom, and preparing to take possession of whatever land they reached. The chief weakness was want of some central organization, some means of stringing them together, of advertising them, of shouting that they had a mission, and of making *them* believe it. The Library Association, founded in 1877, was composed rather of scholars than of business men; nor was it in any sense a *Public Library* Association. Many of the librarians were men who appeared content to sit down among their books and share the dust; and while the very real public appreciation of the libraries forbade an existence absolutely vegetable, there was no effort towards agitation. Indeed the public took the next step, and by appreciation of what *had* been provided, were led to discover that they required something more. The effects were that new libraries came rapidly into being, that London began to join in the adoption of the Acts, and that there arose a certain amount of discussion as to the possibilities of a more direct share in popular education. That discussion continues academic, and nothing definite has yet been sown in the field; though inasmuch as we are rendering the ground more fertile by tillage we can claim to be still in the movement. The seed also is in preparation; let us glance at its progress since the Education Act of 1870.

Primary education in this country has always been under the influence of an idea; a great thing, if it were always the same idea—as it is *not*. For some years after 1870 the idea (expressed in terms of food) was "bread and butter." Just a plain and simple education—the three R's—not so much as to unfit them for keeping their proper stations in England, but enough to teach them the blessings of emigration, and to render them welcome in Australia and the United States. The swing of the pendulum being widened in consequence, and several regrettable incidents combining to awaken officialdom to the dangers of such a drain, the next course of treatment was "cram." The ensuing product persisted in dying early, after having taken a number of prizes; or else passed the

remainder of his life as a mental dyspeptic. Also he behaved like the child who is dressed in his big brother's suit "made down," and at once announces himself a man. Because—it is worthy of attention—the idea for primary education had been in every case previously adopted and previously cast off by the secondary branch. "Bread and butter" had been our fare in early Victorian days; "cram" was our diet in the fifties and sixties, when Charles Kingsley drew such a picture of the Tomtoddies:—

"Instruction sore long time I bore,
And cramming was in vain,
Till Heaven did please my woes to ease
With water on the brain."

In secondary education the reaction from cram took a tabloid form; concentration was the idea, specialization the shibboleth. Primary has only recently received it as an inspired doctrine; but there are signs that the next step may come at a date earlier than usual, and may provide a more intelligent effort to grapple with a great social problem.

During all those years organised technical education had remained a dream—and the dream of a very few. Recent events (and in particular the agitation for a revision of our fiscal policy) have stirred up unusual interest in the matter. People ask themselves whether it is not owing to a want of technical education that the Englishman is displaced by the German and the American from his position at the head of mercantile affairs. Once let the value of such instruction to other nations be admitted and it cannot be long before the necessity of it for our own people is approved. Side by side with this advance in common sense a new educational ideal is springing up. Shortly before his death Bishop Creighton expressed it in words which I cannot do better than quote:—"The main business of education is not to enable people to get on, but to enable them to use the time when they are not getting on."

Paradox as this appears to be, I consider that a proper appreciation of all that it implies would give us (*will* give us perhaps in time) a system of mental training more nearly according with the dictates of common sense and modern requirements than any yet imposed upon us. Let this belief prevail, that the real test of our education is the use which

we make of our leisure, and you find a populace whose standard of general intelligence has been immeasurably heightened. You also find that the instrument of this approach towards perfection is twofold. First, a system of technical—instruction, shall we say—by which the man is being fitted for his work in a world of men; and then an *education*, that he may be enabled to use the time when he is not getting on. This will be conducted on kindergarten lines in that the teaching will be intelligent and adapted to individual requirements. And with these, a recognised essential portion of the dual system, will be the Public Library.

This apparent digression from the main line of my subject was embarked on with some reluctance; yet I felt it necessary to show that though parallel straight lines never meet, yet if there has been anywhere a hair's-breadth of divergence from the path, then at some time or other as they run towards infinity those lines will touch. The public library had little to do with the products of the bread-and-butter school: these, if they stayed in England, were educated by their children. With the products of cram we have more intercourse, since, when primary education was in throes with the system, secondary, having outgrown it and become a ratepayer, was engaged in adopting the Public Libraries Acts throughout the kingdom. Specialization has scarcely advanced sufficiently in its primary stage to enable us to judge of its effects upon the child, so we may say broadly that those children with whom for the past ten years the public library has dealt are creatures of the earlier system. It is in part owing to this system that the libraries to-day present such an *olla podrida*—such a miscellany of information. We have ordered our ways to fit in with an educational idea which has daily grown more unmanageable; but we are not too old to change our ways, and indeed throughout our "Jack of all trades" experiences have kept a watchword—a rallying cry—which will enable us still to replenish the firing line wherever the battle is joined. That watchword is "utility." Some years ago, at an earlier stage of the movement, Professor Stanley Jevons wrote these words:—"The main *raison d'être* of free public libraries—as indeed of public museums, art galleries, parks, halls, public clocks, and many other kinds of public works—is the enormous

increase of utility which is thereby acquired by the community at a trifling cost. If a beautiful picture be hung in the dining room of a private house it may perhaps be gazed at by a few guests a score or two of times in the year. Its real utility is too often that of ministering to the selfish pride of its owner. If it be hung in the National Gallery it will be enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of persons. . . . The same principle applies to books in common ownership. If a man possesses a library of a few thousand volumes, by far the greater part of them must lie for years untouched upon the shelves. But a library of five or ten thousand volumes opened free to the population of a town may be used a thousand times as much. It is a striking case of what I propose to call 'The principle of the multiplication of utility'—a principle which lies at the base of some of the most important processes of political economy."

In what manner do public libraries foster this multiplication of utility in the community? In this—they aid the mental individuality. Much of our modern education is a bed of Procrustes, in that the pupil is required to conform to a certain general standard, which having been set to contain the average individual is bound both to cramp those above and to confuse those below that standard. Only when one gets into the current of life does he begin to profit by the teaching he obtained, for only then does his individuality receive full attention. But he cannot advance far upon a past curriculum; unless he supplements his general instruction with some special knowledge he *must* retrograde. And, to gain the full benefit from this special knowledge (which is to enable him directly to get on), he must bring to its study not merely a set of general principles from primary and secondary education, but a mental training and discipline, a habit of mind, which only a new knowledge—knowledge gained upon *unprescribed* lines—can bestow. And such new knowledge, which can co-ordinate the earlier with the later forms of study, is supplied in its most appropriate measure by the public library.

The immediate duty of the library is to act as a link; a link between stages of education, a link between periods of life, a link between conditions of men and (especially) a link between information, which is cheap, and knowledge, which is not. I do not decry the general reader—in this specialist

age one often feels that a heightened standard of general intelligence is more than ever desirable—but it is indubitable that the general reader is too often one whose mind is stored with an amazing amount of useless information. A book should act upon the mind as flint acts upon steel: the process should be illuminating. Alas, that it so frequently is as a stone falling into a morass. Yet I have seen such a marsh in a way to become fair ground; for the public library had linked the man with all that was upbuilding, renewing and illuminating in our literature. Condensing it to a sentence—the public library is an educational factor because it enables men to realise their opportunities.

The principle of natural selection in the animal and vegetable kingdoms has had results which we can all appreciate; but artificial selection under scientific guidance has resulted in improvements which nature would not have made. So with books; how many would, without some leading, turn straight to Shakespeare, or appreciate the beauties of convoluted thought which Browning's "Paracelsus" offers? Introspection it is true may be carried too far; but as a nation we are perhaps too little introspective. The ordinary unlettered man lives on the surface with himself, and greets his acquaintances from the teeth outward. He flutters over the elemental depths of nature as a butterfly over deep water. But whence most often comes the command, "*Nosce te ipsum*"? Is it not from a book; and in the light of that self-knowledge (gained not all at once, but step by step)—in that light great thoughts become intelligible which before were so much breath. To such an one the public library may be as the astronomer's sensitive plate, receiving and recording for his benefit rays of stellar light which have travelled through time and space that they may augment his knowledge of higher things.

The influence of literature is one of the great mysteries of life, since it is independent of race, independent of religion, independent even of riches. It is independent of race—what have *we* in common with him who wrote the *Rubaiyat*? Yet those musical quatrains which expressed the soul of the Persian poet are potent to-day in our Northern clime, and echo the heart's cry of men who in everything but heart are utterly alien from their author. It is independent of religion; the

god a writer worshipped may have been fiction for two thousand years; but if the man revealed himself through his writing, if his worship has been the dedication of the best that was in him to the best that he knew, then we accept its beauties as tribute to a higher Pantheism, and take as the expression of our own better selves words whose first fragrance was offered to an idol.

It is independent of riches; two of the proudest names upon its roll are those of a blind beggar and a strolling player. Then since neither class nor creed nor climate can prevent deep from calling unto deep, we may well ask ourselves what it is which so outlasts the monuments of stone, which preserves a few lines of song for the imperishable record of a perished empire; which sways the minds of men in a far-off age and to-day repeats its message and obtains its influence though triple brass has crumbled into dust. Literature is a voice—those who answer it may "tread Alp high amid the whispering dead." Literature is life—and many creeping dully upon a dusty track of straitened duties have received from the books of a public library that blessed unforgettable "taste of being from the well beside the waste, before the phantom caravan has reached the nothing it set out from."

To me a great library speaks rather of the past than the present, and of the future more than of the past. The sum of this nation's knowledge is gathered from many things other than books; but to those who shall come after, the books that the nation produced must form the basis and staple of all our history. Is it not strange to think that those thousands of clay tablets which composed the Royal Library at Nippur could only have been preserved to us by that disaster which defeated the people and destroyed the palace? But for the fire against which their storehouse was proof, dispersal or destruction more swift was their inevitable fate. And so I like to think that explorers "of states unborn and accents yet unknown," sinking experimental shafts over buried London, may come upon what was once a public library, and learn of our life to-day from the works of George Meredith and Marie Corelli. The extent of the find would probably be very great: there is no sign that the present rate of book production will diminish, and as book readers we are probably first among the

nations. A reading people, with a distinct taste for literature; is it not then a pity that our taste is so ill directed? The scrappy, the vapid, the sensational—all so eagerly read and apparently contenting their readers week after week; I am inclined to hold it a greater evil than downright badness would be. The nation's great need is direction in its reading; and to some extent this is supplied by the mere existence of the public library. I do not mean to say that one could not be a member of a library for years and never be lifted out of oneself by matters beyond experience. But I do say that it would be difficult. Within my circle of observation (not perhaps of very great extent) I cannot recall anyone whose taste has remained during a twelve-month at an uniformly low level of reading. The level may not have risen or remained very high—but at least the rise occurred.

Now if you agree with me that educational value may be expressed in other terms than those of school books, you will admit that the public library is educational (at its *lowest* value) from the facts that it provides in its choice and variety of books which do not fall below a certain standard, an antidote to "scrappy" reading, a relief from the suburban monotony of many lives, and a qualification to the literary poverty prevailing in a majority of English homes. With an immense mass of literature, good, cheap, and easily obtainable, not one of us but can think of people—good middle-class, not unintelligent people—who do not appear to have a readable book in their possession. It is one of the arguments against the public library, that the very best books are now so cheap that all can afford to purchase them. They can; but the point is that they do not. And, apart from the manifest fact that even a small library will contain more good books than any ordinary person can afford, we must consider that the literary education of the sexes proceeds on very divergent lines, and for the sex feminine the public library has a most distinct educational value. A woman's imagination is at once more vivid and more superficial than a man's: the female novelette reader is of a higher social order than the male "bittite"; while the monotony which ensues from confinement and an unvaried round of domestic duties, demands the opposite extreme of sensationalism and shallowness for its relief. At

the same time few women care for what they would call "far-fetched" books—*id est*, works embodying scientific possibilities which are not yet within practical reach. In *The House with the Green Shutters*, two women whose whole lives are centred in a sordid domestic tragedy are made to turn to the weekly novelette and discuss with some show of interest whether the heroine would or would not marry her marquis. The picture in essentials is true of many existences; and while it is impossible to say that a reading of Tennyson or Ruskin would not be more uplifting, I maintain that, on the wider issue, much of the fiction which is taken from our public libraries has an ameliorating if not an educational influence.

The Westminster Public Libraries serve the literary needs of a very large area, comprising representatives of almost every class in the community. Statistics of reading during a twelve-month, both of books borrowed and taken home and works consulted in the reference departments, may be held to prove anything or nothing as far as educational value is concerned; but a slight analysis of the figures will perhaps have some interest. From the five libraries of the City 1190 volumes of Philosophical works were borrowed for home reading, while 1464 were consulted. Of works on Theology 2706 volumes were taken away and 3918 were consulted. Of books on Sociology, Law and Politics the number borrowed was 3427, while the number consulted was 24,135. Think for a moment of the meaning of the latter figures. They imply that probably four out of five persons had some definite point to decide in law, politics or political economy—some exact knowledge to gain. The actual consultation may have taken only five minutes, but I do not think that we can estimate the value of the information acquired by the time spent in obtaining it. Even if we leave out of the argument the educational influence of the consulting department and deal only with those books borrowed for home use, the figures are still impressive.

Nearly 8000 books dealing with Natural Science and the Useful Arts were read in a year. What educational value does that fact express? Books on the Fine Arts numbered 5300. English Literature over 13,000, History, Biography and Travel over 20,000—the mere figures are evidence that,

whether we do or do not believe in the public library, a vast amount of knowledge is yearly placed in the hands of those who but for the library would never have the opportunity to acquire it. The issue of Fiction was 199,153 volumes; a percentage of about 63 on the total output.

Now I cannot tell how far my audience will go in disparagement of the novel; but for myself I am inclined to think that much of the outcry recently raised is absurd. I will further state my opinion that a great deal of the fiction issued from our public libraries has a distinct educational value, and that the influence of the whole is by no means for ill. For one thing the lowest grade novel never finds its way into a library; for another there are always individuals ready to act the part of press censors; and, in general, the public themselves have a keenly discriminating taste which leaves the unworthy after one trial severely alone.

It is noteworthy that nearly all the great books in whose preservation the ages have acquiesced have been works of fiction—that is to say, the literature of the imagination. We would almost as soon predict immortality for Fielding and Sir Walter Scott—for Thackeray and George Meredith, as we would accord it to Shakespeare and Milton. Then wherefore decry an issue of fiction in which these novelists, and others but little inferior, are so largely represented? Even if the critic puts forward the works of Mrs. Henry Wood and Miss Worboise as evidence of a non-educational tendency, I will assert that such books belong to the anodyne and demulcent type; they are bare, but blameless. Taken as an antidote to the novelette and tit-bit literature they indicate an improving standard of taste. One of the most important educational factors in the work of the public library is its share in heightening the standard of popular taste. I cannot show you diagrams by which to make my beliefs impressive—but I can record a belief that the improvement exists and that to the public library is due a share not inconsiderable. We hear so much now about “rays”—“X” rays, “N” rays, and radium—is it not possible that a large collection of books might also emit rays, and that their combined influence might so act upon the moral tone that one who took out a borrower’s ticket as a confirmed reader of Marie Corelli and Hawley

Smart should find himself at the end of a year delicately entangled with Mrs. Humphrey Ward and passing criticisms upon F. Marion Crawford?

Not only does the public library improve the moral tone, it is often a means by which to supplement a defective technical education. Less often in London than in the great provincial libraries, but still to some extent in London, we may see the artisan, the mechanic, the engineer, each engaged night after night in study of the books which belong to his calling. He is far better enabled to do this seated in a reference library, and in touch not alone with books, but also with suggestion, assistance, and guidance, than he could ever be at home, even supposing that he could afford to purchase the works of which he had need.

In this matter of guidance to readers a foreshadowed development of public library practice is of interest. You may recall the story of the boy who started to read through the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. His report was that he found Algebra a bit tough “but Alligators was bully.” It has for some time been recognised that though readers may incidentally acquire much valuable knowledge of algebra, alligators, *et hoc genus omne*, the ultimate gain to them would be very much greater if their reading were more systematised. The National Home Reading Union sets itself to supply this system by means of reading circles, hand lists of books upon subjects valuable for study, lectures, and much literature. To bring the Union more into the sphere of practical utility it would be a good thing if some scheme of co-operation between itself and the public libraries could be arranged. The library would add to its value by giving readers the opportunity of joining such a study circle, since co-operation is a most admirable thing for weak members. An army may have to march at the pace of its slowest soldier; but it is some comfort to men of a quicker stride to know that the slowest man is marching at a rate which if alone would be impossible to him. Once started, a reading circle generates its own enthusiasm, and the librarian is repaid for his trouble by the fact that classical works which have never previously left the security of the shelves are now dipped into, read, and quoted by someone who might have seen their titles every time that he glanced

through the catalogue, but who had certainly never thought of them as bearing at all upon any subject in which he could be interested. If an art gallery and museum—those almost indispensable adjuncts to the public library—are established, the “personally conducted” reading party may pursue their studies with the concrete examples before them, entering the domains of Minerva with confidence, as travellers who know that their passports are in proper form; not like shipwrecked mariners wondering whether they have landed upon a desert island, or worse. The growing desire for such art galleries has been adversely commented upon by critics who quote Ruskin’s words that the British public has “despised art.” But what of that; we do not cease to build lighthouses because the rocks still exist, nor learn to swim before entering the water.

Now briefly let me touch upon some recent developments in library practice. It is a maxim of classification that one refers from the general to the particular, and I have thought it better to keep on the high ground of accepted facts than to descend into an arena where controversies still rage around matters of internal economy. Whether the educational value of the public library would be augmented by giving readers free access to the shelves is still the subject of bitter debate. Many librarians, it is conceivable, would prefer to die in the last ditch rather than grant so large a measure of Home Rule. For myself I think open access an excellent plan—where the librarian can choose his public; but, as this is still an ideal condition, and bearing in mind the experiences of American libraries (experiences which our cousins appear to review with equanimity), I should not be disposed to forfeit such safeguards as a barrier and an indicator at present afford.

The variations of method practised by librarians in the United States are rather those induced by their wider scope and larger income than any definite advance in educational value. Mention must be made of the American care for children, a care which I consider is carried quite too far, as it introduces the child to a kind of predigested literature, which does not allow him to judge for himself in that more haphazard style which our juveniles enjoy. Drawing an inference from the reports which I read, young America is in danger of becoming a little prig, simply owing to the lectures and classes

and object lessons and special attendants which are provided for his benefit. And it is an admirable comment upon these conditions that Mr. Andrew Keogh, of Yale University, comparing English with American libraries, came to the conclusion that in spite of our disadvantages as to buildings, income and conditions of action we are first in the world for the amount of useful work done. It is again the question of allowing individuality to develop; the fact that to obtain full advantage from education upon prescribed lines, it is necessary to go outside those lines—the further outside the better.

The printing of a book is somewhat a mechanical process. Once set up the formes of type leave the same impress upon page after page, as the paper is brought into contact. But not thus does the book print its message upon the mind. The influence varies according to individual characters and cases (and even the white child-mind is in some degree a palimpsest) so that none can be expected to take precisely the same impression as his neighbour. Therefore the more individual our tuition can be made the better it will be for a future generation: since the knowledge which a man acquires for himself is always the best knowledge. Our ideal should be everywhere to keep children in constant touch with the library, while in no way sacrificing their freedom of choice; in this way will result young men and young women who have acquired habits of reading and desire for knowledge without losing independence of thought.

Hampered though he is by a limited rate, sometimes by a makeshift building and too often by the jurisdiction of incompetent amateurs—in spite of all these drawbacks, the librarian is an optimist. He looks forward—it is indeed difficult not to look forward, since the educational value of the public library is only beginning—he looks forward to a day when he may use his own discretion in interpreting the needs of the public; a day when the library, the school of science and art, and the schools for technical education shall be branches to that tree of which the primary and secondary schools form the trunk. There will be a tree bearing both flowers and fruit, forming good citizens, shaping useful lives, aiding England to take and keep the foremost place among nations, by reason of her proud traditions, free institutions, and the enlightenment of her sons.